



The YUKON TRAIL

A TALE OF THE NORTH
WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

CHAPTER XVI.

Gordon Spends a Busy Evening.

Paget smoked placidly, but the heart within him was troubled. It looked as if Selfridge had made up his mind to frame Gordon for a prison sentence. The worst of it was that he need not invent any evidence or take any chances. If Macdonald came through on the stand with an identification of Elliot as one of his assailants, the young man would go down the river to serve time. There was enough corroborative testimony to convict St. Peter himself.

"I'm just telling you what he said," Diane explained. "And it worried me. His smile was cynical. I couldn't help thinking that if he wants to get even with Gordon—"

Mrs. Paget stopped. The maid had just brought into the room a visitor. Diane moved forward and shook hands with him. "How do you do, Mr. Strong? Take this big chair."

Hanford Strong accepted the chair and a cigar. He came promptly to the object of his call.

"I don't know whether this is where I should have come or not. Are you folks for young Elliot or are you for Selfridge?" he demanded.

"If you put it that way, we're for Elliot," smiled Peter.

"All right. Let me put it another way. You work for Mac. Are you on his side or on Elliot's in this matter of the coal claims?"

Diane looked at Peter. He took his time to answer.

"We hope the coal claimants will win, but we've got sense enough to see that Gordon is in here to report the facts. That's what he is paid for. He'll tell the truth as he sees it. If his superior officers decide on those facts against Macdonald, I don't see that Elliot is to blame."

"That's how it looks to me," agreed Strong. "I'm for a wide-open Alaska, but that don't make it right to put this young fellow through for a crime he didn't do. Fact is, I like him. He's square. So I've come to tell you something."

He smoked for a minute silently before he continued.

"I've got no evidence in his favor, but I bumped into something a little while ago that didn't look good to me. You know I room next him at the hotel. I heard a noise in his room, and I thought that was funny, seeing as he was locked up in jail. So I kinder listened and heard whispers and the sound of some one moving about. There's a door between his room and mine that is kept locked. I looked through the keyhole, and in Elliot's room there was Wally Selfridge and another man. They were looking through papers at the desk. Wally put a stack of them in his pocket and they went out, locking the door behind them."

"They had no business doing that," burst out Diane. "Wally Selfridge isn't an officer of the law."

Strong nodded dryly to her. "Just what I thought. So I followed them. They went to Macdonald's office. After a while Wally came out and left the other man there. Then presently the lights went out. The man is camped there for the night. Will you tell me why?"

"Why?" repeated Diane with her sharp eyes on the miner.

"Because Wally has some papers there he don't want to get away from him."

"Some of Gordon's papers, or course."

"You've said it."

"All his notes and evidence in the case of the coal claims, probably," contributed Peter.

"Maybe Wally has stolen them, but he hasn't nerve enough to burn them till he gets orders from Mac. So he's holding them safe at the office," guessed Strong.

"It's an outrage."

"Surest thing you know. Wally has fixed it to frame him for prison and to play safe about his evidence on the coal claims."

"What are you going to do about it?" Diane asked her husband sharply.

Peter rose. "First I'm going to see Gordon and hear what he has to say. Come on, Strong. We may be gone quite a while, Diane. Don't wait up for me if you get through your stint of nursing."

Gopher Jones let them into the ramshackle building that served as a jail, and after three dollars had jingled in the palm of his hand he stepped outside and left the men alone with his prisoner. The three put their heads together and whispered.

"I'll meet you outside the house of Selfridge in half an hour, Strong," was the last thing that Gordon said before Jones came back to order out the visitors.

As soon as the place was dark again, Gordon set to work on the flimsy framework of his cell window. He knew already it was so decrepit that he could escape any time he desired.

but until now there had been no reason why he should. Within a quarter of an hour he lifted the iron-grilled sash bodily from the frame and crawled through the window.

He found Paget and Strong waiting for him in the shadows of a pine outside the yard of Selfridge.

"To begin with, you walk straight home and go to bed, Peter," the young man announced. "You're not in this. You're not invited to our party. I don't have to tell you why, do I?"

The engineer understood the reason. He was an employee of Macdonald, a man thoroughly trusted by him. Even though Gordon intended only to right a wrong, it was better that Paget should not be a party to it. Reluctantly Peter went home.

Gordon turned to Strong. "I owe you a lot already. There's no need for you to run a risk of getting into trouble for me. If things break right, I can do what I have to do without help."

"And if they don't?" Strong waved an impatient hand. "Cut it out, Elliot. I've taken a fancy to go through with this. I never did like Selfridge anyhow, and I ain't got a wife and I don't work for Mac. Why shouldn't I have some fun?"

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "All right. Might as well play ball and get things moving, then."

The little miner knocked at the door. Wally himself opened. Elliot, from the shelter of the pine, saw the two men in talk. Selfridge shut the door and came to the edge of the porch. He gave a gasp and his hands went trembling into the air. The six-gun of the miner had been pressed hard against his fat paunch. Under curt orders he moved down the steps and out of the yard to the tree.

At sight of Gordon the eyes of Wally stood out in amazement. Little sweat beads burst out on his forehead, for he remembered how busy he had been collecting evidence against this man.

"W-w-what do you want?" he asked. "Got your keys with you?"

"Y-yes."

"Come with us."

Wally breathed more freely. For a moment he had thought this man had come to take vengeance on him.

They led him by alleys and back streets to the office of the Macdonald Yukon Trading company. Under orders he knocked on the door and called out who he was. Gordon crouched close to the log wall, Strong behind him.

"Let me in, Olson," ordered Selfridge.

The door opened, and a man stood on the threshold. Elliot was on top of him like a panther. The man went



Was on Top of Him Like a Panther.

down as though his knees were oiled hinges. Before he could gather his slow wits, the barrel of a revolver was shoved against his teeth.

"Take it easy, Olson," advised Gordon. "Get up—slowly. Now, step back into the office. Keep your hands up."

Strong closed and locked the door behind them.

"I want my papers, Selfridge. Dig up your keys and get them for me," Elliot commanded.

Wally did not need any keys. He knew the combination of the safe and opened it. From an inner drawer he drew a bunch of papers. Gordon looked them over carefully. Strong sat on a table and toyed with a revolver which he jammed playfully into the stomach of his fat prisoner.

"All here," announced the field agent. The safe-robbers locked their prisoners in the office and disappeared into the night. They stopped at the house of the collector of customs, a genial

young fellow with whom Elliot had played tennis a good deal, and left the papers in his hands for safe-keeping. After which they returned to the hotel and reached the second floor by way of the back stairs used by the servants.

Here they parted, each going to his own room. Gordon slept like a school-boy and woke only when the sun poured through the window upon his bed in a broad ribbon of warm gold.

He got up, bathed, dressed, and went down into the hotel dining room. The waiters looked at him in amazement. Gordon ate as if nothing were the matter, apparently unaware of the excitement he was causing. He paid not the least attention to the nudging and the whispering. After he had finished breakfast, he lit a cigar, leaned back in his chair, and smoked placidly.

Presently an eruption of men poured into the room. At the head of them was Gopher Jones. Near the rear Wally Selfridge lingered modestly. He was not looking for hazardous adventure.

"What you doing here?" demanded Gopher, bristling up to Elliot.

The young man watched a smoke wreath float ceilingward before he turned his mild gaze on the chief of police.

"I'm smoking."

"Don't you know we just got in from hunting you—two posesses of us been out all night?" Gopher glared savagely at the smoker.

Gordon looked distressed. "That's too bad. There's a telephone in my room, too. Why didn't you call up? I've been there all night."

"The deuce you have," exploded Jones. "And us combing the hills for you. Young man, you're mighty smart. But I want to tell you that you'll pay for this."

"Did you want me for anything in particular—or just to get up a poker game?" asked Elliot suavely.

The leader of the posse gave himself to a job of scientific profanity. He was spurred on to outdo himself because he had heard a titter or two behind him. When he had finished, he formed a procession. He, with Elliot handcuffed beside him, was at the head of it. It marched to the jail.

CHAPTER XVII.

Sheba Does Not Think So.

The flingers of Sheba were busy with the embroidery upon which she worked, but her thoughts were full of the man who lay asleep on the lounge. His strong body lay at ease, relaxed.

Already health was flowing back into his veins. Beneath the tan of the thin, muscular cheeks a warmer color was beginning to creep. Soon he would be about again, vigorous and forceful, striding over obstacles to the goal he had set himself.

Sheba had sent him a check for the amount he had paid her and had refused to see him or anybody else.

Shamed and humiliated, she had kept to her room. The check had come back to her by mail.

Across the face of it he had written in his strong handwriting:

"I don't wish on my bets. You can't give to me what is not mine."

"Do not think for an instant that I shall not marry you."

She moved to adjust a window blind and when she returned found that his steady eyes were fixed upon her.

"You're getting better fast," she said.

"Yes."

The girl had a favor to ask of him and lest her courage fail she plunged into it.

"Mr. Macdonald, if you say the word Mr. Elliot will be released on bail. I am thinking you will be so good as to say it."

His narrowed eyes held a cold glitter. "Why?"

"You must know he is innocent. You must—"

"I know only what the evidence shows," he cut in, warily on his guard. "He may or may not have been one of my attackers. From the first blow I was dazed. But everything points to it that he hired—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted the Irish girl, her dark eyes shining softly. "The way of it is that he saved your life, that he fought for you, and that he is in prison because of it."

"If that is true, why doesn't he bring some proof of it?"

"Proof!" she cried scornfully. "Between friends—"

"He's no friend of mine. The man is a meddler. I despise him."

The scarlet flooded her cheeks. "And I am liking him very, very much," she flung back stanchly.

Macdonald looked up at the vivid flushed face and found it wholly charming. He liked her none the less because her fine eyes were hot and defiant in behalf of his rival.

"Very well," he smiled. "I'll get him out if you'll do me a good turn."

"Thank you. It's a bargain."

"Then sing to me."

"What shall I sing?"

"Sing 'Divided.'"

The long lashes veiled her soft eyes while she considered. In a way he had tricked her into singing for him a love-song she did not want to sing. But she made no protest. Swiftly she turned and slid along the bench. Her fingers touched the keys and she began.

Sheba paid her pledge in full. After the first two stanzas were finished she sang the last ones as well:

An' what about the wather when I'd have ould Paddy's boat.

Is it me that would be afraid to grip the oars an' go ahead?

Oh, I could find him by the light of sun or moon or star;

But there's cauldier things than salt waves between us, so they are.

Oh, anse!

Sure well I know he'll never have the heart to come to me.

An' love is wild as any wave that wanders on the sea.

'Tis the same if he is near me, 'tis the same if he is far;

His thoughts are hard an' ever hard between us, so they are.

Och, anse!

Her hands dropped from the keys and she turned slowly on the end of the seat. The dark lashes fell to her



"I'm Going to Marry You, Sheba."

hot cheeks. He did not speak, but she felt the steady insistence of his gaze. In self-defense she looked at him.

The pallor of his face lent accent to the fire that smoldered in his eyes.

"I'm going to marry you, Sheba. Make up your mind to that, girl," he said harshly.

There was infinite pity in the look she gave him. "There's cauldier things than salt waves between us, so they are," she quoted.

"Not if I love you and you love me. By the Lord, I trample down everything that comes between us."

She knew the tremendous driving power of the man and she was afraid in her heart that he would sweep her from the moorings to which she clung.

"There is something else I haven't told you." The embarrassed lashes lifted bravely from the flushed cheeks to meet steadily his look. "I don't think—that I—care for you. 'Tis I that am ashamed at my—fickleness. But I don't—not with the full of my heart."

His bold, possessive eyes yielded no fraction of all they claimed. "Time enough for that, Sheba. Truth is that you're afraid to let yourself love me. You're worried because you can't measure me by the little two-by-four foot-rule you brought from Ireland with you."

Sheba nodded her dusky little head in naive candor. "I think there will be some truth in that, Mr. Macdonald. You're lawless, you know."

"I'm a law to myself, if that's what you mean. It is my business to help hammer out an empire in this Northland. No need for me to brag. What I have done speaks for me as a guidepost to what I mean to do."

"I know," the girl admitted with the impetuous generosity of her race. "I hear it from everybody. You have built towns and railroads and developed mines and carried the twentieth century into new outposts. You have given work to thousands. But you go so fast I can't keep step with you. I am one of the little folks for whom laws were made."

"Then I'll make a new code for you," he said, smiling. "Just do as I say and everything will come out right."

Faintly her smile met his. "My grandmother might have agreed to that. But we live in a new world for women. They have to make their own decisions. I suppose that is a part of the penalty we pay for freedom."

Diane came into the room and Macdonald turned to her.

"I have just been telling Sheba that I am going to marry her—that there is no escape for her. She had better get used to the idea that I intend to make her happy."

The older cousin glanced at Sheba and laughed with a touch of embarrassment. "Whether she wants to be happy or not, O Cave Man?"

"I'm going to make her want to."

Sheba fled, but from the door she flung back her challenge. "I don't think so."

Macdonald kept his word to Sheba. He used his influence to get Elliot released, and with a touch of cynicism quite characteristic went on the bond of his rival. An information was filed against the field agent of the land department for highway robbery and attempted murder, but Gordon went about his business just as if he were not under a cloud.

None the less, he walked the streets a marked man. Women and children looked at him curiously and whispered as he passed. The sullen, hostile eyes of miners measured him silently.

In the states the fight between the coal claimants and their foes was growing more bitter. The muckrakers were busy, and the sentiment outside had settled so definitely against granting the patents that the national administration might at any time jettison Macdonald and his backers as a sop to public opinion.

It was not hard for Gordon to guess how unpopular he was, but he did not let this interfere with his activities. He moved to and fro among the mining camps with absolute disregard of the growing hatred against him. Paget came to him at last with a warning.

"What's that I hear about you being

almost killed up on Bonanza?" Peter wanted to know.

"Down in the None Such mine, you mean? It did seem to be raining hammers as I went down the shaft," admitted his friend.

"Were the hammers dropped on purpose?"

Gordon looked at him with a grim smile. "Your guess is just as good as mine, Peter. What do you think?"

Peter answered seriously. "I think it isn't safe for you to take the chances you do, Gordon. I find a wrong impression about you prevalent among the men. They are blaming you for stirring up all this trouble on the outside, and they are worried for fear the mines may close and they will lose their jobs. I tell you that they are in a dangerous mood."

"Sorry, but I can't help that."

"You can stay around town and not go out alone nights."

"I dare say I can, but I'm not going to."

"I think you had better use a little sense, Gordon. I dare say I am exaggerating the danger. But when you go around with that jaunty devil-may-care way of yours, the men think you are looking for trouble—and you're likely to get it."

"Am I?"

"I know what I'm talking about. Nine out of ten of the men think you tried to murder Macdonald after you had robbed him and that your nerve weakened on the job. This seems to some of the most lawless to give them a moral right to put you out of the way. Anyhow, it is a kind of justification, according to their point of view, I'm not defending it, of course. I'm telling you so that you can appreciate your danger."

"You have done your duty, then, Peter."

"But you don't intend to take my advice?"

"I'll tell you what I told you last time when you warned me. I'm going through with the job I've been hired to do, just as you would stick it out in my place. I don't think I'm in much danger. Men in general are law-abiding. They growl, but they don't go as far as murder."

Peter gave him up.

The next issue of the Kusiak Sun contained a bitter editorial attack upon Elliot. The occasion for it was a press dispatch from Washington to the effect that the pressure of public opinion had become so strong that Winston, commissioner of the general land office, might be forced to resign his place. This was a blow to the coal claimants, and the Sun charged in vitriolic language that the reports of Elliot were to blame. He was, the newspaper claimed, an enemy to all those who had come to Alaska to earn an honest living there. He was a snake in the grass, and as such every decent man ought to hold him in scorn.

Elliot read this just as he was leaving for the Willow Creek camp. He thrust the paper impatiently into his coat pocket and swung to the saddle. Why did they persecute him? He had told nothing but the truth, nothing not required of him by the simplest, elemental honesty. Yet he was treated as an outcast and a criminal. The injustice of it was beginning to rankle.

He was temperamentally an optimist, but depression rode with him to the gold camp and did not lift from his spirits till he started back next day for Kusiak. The news had been flashed by wire all over the United States that he was a crook. His friends and relatives could give no adequate answer to the fact that an indictment hung over his head. In Alaska he was already convicted by public opinion.

In the late afternoon, while Gordon was still fifteen miles from Kusiak, his horse fell lame. He led it limping to the cabin of some miners.

There were three of them, and they had been drinking heavily from a jug of whisky left earlier in the day by the stage-driver. Gordon was in two minds whether to accept their surly permission to stay for the night, but the lameness of his horse decided him.

Not caring to invite their hostility, he gave his name as Gordon instead of Elliot. He was to learn within the hour that this was mistake number two.

From a pocket of the coat he had thrown on a bed protruded the newspaper Gordon had brought from Kusiak. One of the men, a big red-headed fellow, pulled it out and began sulkily to read.

While he read the other two bickered and drank and snarled at each other. All three of the men were in that stage of drunkenness when a quarrel is likely to flare up at a moment's notice.

"Listen here," demanded the man with the newspaper. "Tell you what, boys, I'm going to wring the neck of that pussyfooting spy Elliot if I ever get a chance."

He read aloud the editorial in the Sun. After he had finished, the others joined him in a chorus of curses.

"I always did hate a spy—and this one's a murderer too. Why don't some one fill his hide with lead?" one of the men wanted to know.

Redhead was sitting at the table. He thumped a heavy fist so hard that the tin cups jumped. "Gimme a crack at him and I'll show you!"

A shadow fell across the room. In the doorway stood a newcomer. Gordon had a sensation as if a lump of ice had been drawn down his spine. For the man who had just come in was Big Bill Macy, and he was looking at the field agent with eyes in which amazement, anger and triumph blazed.

"I'm glad to death to meet up with you again, Mr. Elliot," he jeered. "Seems like old times on Wild-Goose."

"What you say his name is?" cut in the man with the newspaper.

"Hasn't he introduced himself, boys?" Macy answered with a cruel

grin. "Now, ain't that modest of him? You lads are entertaining that well-known detective and spy, Gordon Elliot, that renowned king of hold-ups—"

"The red-headed man interrupted with a howl of rage. 'If you're telling it straight, Bill Macy, I'll learn him to spy on me.'"

Elliot was sitting on one of the beds. He had not moved an inch since Macy had appeared, but the brain behind his live eyes was taking stock of the situation. Big Bill blocked the doorway. The table was in front of the window. Unless he could fight his way out, there was no escape for him. He was trapped.

Quietly Gordon looked from one to another.

"I'm not spying on you. My horse is lame. You can see that for yourself. All I asked was a night's lodging."

"Under another name than your own, you cussed sneak."

The field agent did not understand the fury of the man, because he did not know that these miners were working the claim under a defective title and that they had jumped to the conclusion that he had come to get evidence against them. But he knew that never in his life had he been in a tighter hole. In another minute they would attack him. Whether it would run to murder he could not tell. At the best he would be hammered helpless.

But no evidence of this knowledge appeared in his manner.

"I didn't give my last name because there is a prejudice against me in this country," he explained in an even voice.

He wondered as he spoke if he had better try to fling himself through the window sash. There might be a remote chance that he could make it.

The miner at the table killed this possibility by rising and standing squarely in the road.

"Look out! He's got a gat," warned Macy.

Gordon fervently wished he had. But he was unarmed. While his eyes quested for a weapon he played for time.

"You can't get away with this, you know. The United States government is back of me. It's known I left the Willow Creek camp. I'll be traced here."

Through Gordon's mind there flashed a word of advice once given him by a professional prizefighter: "If you get in a rough house, don't wait for the other fellow to hit first."

They were crouching for the attack. In another moment they would be upon him. Almost with one motion he stooped, snatched up by the leg a heavy stool, and sprang to the bed upon which he had been sitting.

The four men closed with him in a rush. They came at him low, their heads protected by uplifted arms. His memory brought to him a picture of the whitewashed gridiron of a football field, and in it he saw a vision of safety.

The stool crashed down upon Big Bill Macy's head. Gordon hurled the crumpling figure, plunged between

hands outstretched to seize him, and over the table went through the window, taking the flimsy sash with him.

(TO BE CONTINUED)